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Azerbaijan's Landmine Victims: Realities and Challenges

The Azerbaijan Campaign to Ban Landmines (AzCBL) is a nongovernmental, apolitical, nonprofit organization that was founded in June 1998 in order to work toward a mine-free Azerbaijan. The authors describe how AzCBL and partner organizations are working to improve programs such as social welfare, career assistance, rights awareness, health care and psychological support for mine victims.

Colin Bent and Hafiz Safikhonov [Azerbaijan Campaign to Ban Landmines]

The Azerbaijan Campaign to Ban Landmines is a member of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines and the Cluster Munition Coalition, and since its inception has implemented a number of projects aimed at combating the humanitarian and socio-economic consequences of landmines. In addition, the AzCBL has researched and written the Azerbaijan country report for the *Landmine Monitor Report* since 1999 while also helping to found the Caucasus Campaign to Ban Landmines in 1999 and the Azerbaijan Landmine Victims Association in 2004. It is the AzCBL's mandate to promote Azerbaijan's accession to the Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention¹ and to make sure that the social, economic and psychological needs of Azerbaijan's landmine victims are met.

Addressing the Needs of Landmine Survivors

Between May 2003 and June 2004, the AzCBL, in partnership with Standing Tall Australia International Rehabilitation and Research Support Services Ltd, undertook a project to tackle the issue of landmine victim assistance in Azerbaijan. Commissioned by the International Trust Fund for Demining and Mine Victims Assistance with funding from the U.S. State Department, the project was the first of its kind in Azerbaijan and aimed to create a comprehensive database of landmine victims and their assessed needs based on an eight-district survey. By the end of April 2004, data had been collected on a total of 483 landmine survivors and 127 families of those killed in landmine incidents.

The results of the AzCBL's survey pointed to a distinct gap between the assessed needs of Azerbaijan's landmine victims and services being provided by the government. Out of those surveyed, only 20.4 percent of respondents reported receiving psychological support after becoming disabled, while the vast majority of survivors (92.7 percent) noted that they wanted to be provided with psychological support. Most (67.5 percent) indicated that there were no outreach programs for rehabilitation or physical therapy in their communities. Socioeconomic assistance was noted as nearly non-existent, with 88 percent of respondents indicating that they were unemployed. There was also a significant interest in business/vocational training programs. Many landmine victims were also unaware of their full rights and entitlements under the law, citing a lack of information about existing support mechanisms.

Upon completion of the project, the AzCBL was able to use the survey data to draw conclusions and make recommendations concerning the status of landmine victim assistance in Azerbaijan. In particular, certain challenges must be overcome in order to provide greater assistance to survivors:

- Building capacity and providing ongoing training of health-care practitioners
- Improving facilities for psychological and social support

- Creating opportunities for employment and income generation
- Raising awareness of the rights and needs of persons with disabilities
- Enhancing legislation and the social welfare system to ensure that mine survivors have an adequate income to meet their basic needs
- Encouraging local nongovernmental organizations and agencies to provide funding and implement programs to support mine survivors and other war disabled

It is important to note that, although at the time of the survey there were 35 NGOs in Azerbaijan working in support of people with disabilities, none had worked directly with the problems of landmine victims. Following the project, the AzCBL helped Mammadhasan Hasanov, Director of the Azerbaijan Landmine Victims Association and himself a landmine survivor, attend the "Raising the Voices" training program in Geneva, Switzerland and the Nairobi Summit on a Mine-Free World.² As an NGO, the AzCBL believes that the best way to deliver comprehensive aid to Azerbaijan's landmine survivors is to support new grassroots initiatives that seek to make real progress in improving their well-being. To this end, it is necessary to ensure the existence of programs that give new opportunities to the disabled, empowering mine survivors through income-generation projects and support for self-employment.

Microcredit and Landmine Victim Assistance

In September 2007 the AzCBL completed its last mission to Azerbaijan's rural regions as part of its groundbreaking microcredit project aimed at giving disabled landmine survivors new economic opportunities. Since Dr. Muhammed Yunus won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006 for pioneering the concept, microcredit has become known as an effective means of encouraging development from the ground up. Made possible through a grant from the Swiss Foundation for Landmine Victim Assistance, the microcredit project allowed disabled landmine victims to be given small loans in order to start their own small businesses, with activities ranging from the production and sale of household foodstuffs to the purchase and raising of livestock.

The project began in April 2006 with a number of seminars in four of Azerbaijan's rural regions that focused on teaching landmine survivors the basics of running a small business and how a microcredit loan works. The regional seminars were led by professionals invited by the AzCBL, including staff from the Norwegian Microcredit Organization and a lawyer from the parliament's Agricultural Commission. Due to limited funds, the AzCBL selected six loan candidates based on their business proposals and individual needs, while allotting a maximum of €1,500 (US \$1,905³) to each regional district. Closely monitoring all purchases made by loan recipients and making regular checkups on their businesses throughout the project, the AzCBL staff was amazed at the resourcefulness and motivation to succeed exhibited by the project's participants.

One example of this ingenuity came from Garatel Huseynova, a landmine survivor who had sustained numerous upper-body wounds. Huseynova used her loan to purchase a new industrial mixer to increase the capacity of her small bakery and make a large purchase of flour to receive a more favorable price. Another example is how Habil Mammadov, who had lost a foot to a landmine in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, used his microcredit loan to purchase several cows, which he then sold for a profit. With his earnings, Mammadov then bought some younger cows and a large amount of feed for the winter, and he expected he would again yield a profit.

By its completion, the 15-month project had met with great success, creating sustainable businesses and new opportunities for its participants—all of whom were able to pay back their loans in full and on time. Since the project's completion, the AzCBL has been contacted by a large number of landmine victims who wish to see the project enlarged and duplicated in their districts. Considering the overall success of the project, the AzCBL sees such results as an excellent litmus test for future microcredit/vocational training projects in rural Azerbaijan. Drawing on the incredible resourcefulness and under-utilized skill sets of Azerbaijan's impoverished landmine victims, socioeconomic projects like this one offer proven results by giving victims tools with which they can make tangible improvements in their lives.

Future Victim-assistance Projects

In order to improve the well-being of landmine victims throughout Azerbaijan, the AzCBL has compiled a number of projects that will comprehensively address the issue over the next few years. The largest and most ambitious of these projects is entitled "Mine Survivor Outreach in Azerbaijan," which, after consultation with the Survivor Corps (formerly Landmine Survivors Network) in Bosnia-Herzegovina, was conceived to deliver the farthest-reaching results for Azerbaijan's war disabled. Designed to serve between 700 and 800 landmine survivors, the project seeks to establish a permanent basis of support for victims while providing a support network, psychological assistance, vocational training, employment resources and legal assistance. In addition, the AzCBL wishes to replicate its microcredit project in other regions of Azerbaijan where sustainable, income-generating projects could drastically change the lives of landmine victims for the better. Without funding and support from outside Azerbaijan, however, these projects will not be possible. It is the AzCBL's hope that new partners will want to work on these projects.

Any organizations that wish to provide assistance to Azerbaijan's landmine victims are urged to contact the AzCBL for more information on proposed projects.

Conclusion

Although the AzCBL has worked on a number of projects to improve the lives of landmine survivors and increase the amount of information that is available to the world community concerning the use of such weapons, the organization recognizes that major steps must be taken in order to drastically improve the situation in Azerbaijan. The AzCBL believes that the final solution to Azerbaijan's landmine problem lies in its future accession to the AP Mine Ban Convention.⁴ While this action would ensure a moratorium on the use, production and



Tovuz resident and landmine survivor, Habil Mammadov, stands with his newly purchased cattle, made possible through a microcredit loan provided by SFVLA and the AzCBL.

PHOTO COURTESY OF HAFIZ SAFIKHANOV

stockpiling of the weapon, Article 6 of the Ottawa Convention³ would commit the government to meeting the needs of landmine survivors and allow for greater international assistance. In addition, the AzCBL urges the international community and donor organizations to assist nongovernmental efforts to alleviate the incredible poverty that Azeri landmine victims suffer by supporting grassroots development initiatives in Azerbaijan.

In the absence of specific legislation on survivor assistance, the majority of Azerbaijan's landmine victims receive only a small sum per month in financial assistance. Although this assistance has increased over the years, payments have not kept up with a high rate of inflation, and Azerbaijan's high cost of living is often prohibitive for those unable to find work. It is therefore necessary for nongovernmental organizations to step up to the challenge of creating new opportunities for those who have been underserved by the government, and who are often lost within a complex bureaucracy. It is the

AzCBL's conviction that the *status quo* is simply unacceptable and that it must work toward providing the legal, economic, medical and psychological support so greatly needed by Azerbaijan's landmine victims. ♦

See Endnotes, page 111



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